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Book Review: Promising Practices for Engaging Families in Literacy

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Promising Practices for Engaging Families in Literacy by Holly Kreider, Margaret Caspe, and Diana B. Hiatt-Michael. Charlotte, NC: Information Publishing, Inc., 2013, 146 pp., \$45.99 (paperback).

Promising Practice shows readers how to view literacy outside of school settings, primarily focusing on family literacy. It takes into account children's everyday literacy-related practices in the home as part of their literacy development.

Divided into three parts, this edited collection begins with three chapters focusing on conceptual views and reading literacy. Part II focuses on incorporating families' social cultural factors and expanding parents' existing knowledge and skills. Part III looks at integrating literacy into other contents such as literacy-science integration through partnerships with museums and libraries.

A conceptual overview is provided in the beginning as the foundation of the book, but *Promising Practices* is light on theoretical support. Though this book is practitioner-oriented, strengthening the theoretical foundation would enhance the overall contents. For clarity, the explicit explanation of how key concepts relate to program examples would make it easier for readers to see the connections.

This book helps transform the perspectives of a deficit model ("educate parents to be better") to a family-strength model ("partner with parents as co-learners and co-researchers"). It is important to be cautious of the usage of the dichotomy of "strengths and deficits." Instead of considering them as two separate terms, it would be more appropriate to conceptualize them on a spectrum. Generalization would lead readers to overlook underlying assumptions which would impact practices to serve diverse populations (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2012). For a more strengths-based program, the evaluation should begin even before the program starts to identify knowledge and skills that are essential for the family's function and development (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). In the strengths-deficits continuum, the design of a parent education component itself connotes a certain level of family deficit.

In order to serve diverse populations, Compton-Lilly, Rogers, and Lewis (2012) indicate the importance of examining the program efforts whether they are promoting mainstream values (ie. white, middle-class) or incorporating the values and practices of the diverse population served. For example, considering the values promoted in the read-aloud programs (Chapter 2) and heritage language integration (Chapter 5), where does the program fall in the strengths-deficit spectrum? Making the underlying

assumptions visible would help readers analyze how the program fits into the continuum.

In this book, “evidence-based” programs are emphasized. There is a growing drive for accountability in education, including those focused on literacy. At the program level, there exists growing evidence that family literacy programs justify their funding by demonstrating quantitatively measureable literacy improvement for participants (Descy & Tessaring, 2005). Family literacy interventions are under pressure to demonstrate program effectiveness. To provide evidence, programs tend to provide short-term, rather than long-term evaluations (Carpentieri, 2013). The pressure of providing quantitative evaluations tends to produce skewed results that paint a partial picture of program impacts (Silver, 2012).

This book is a timely addition that brings us back to the origin of children’s literacy development in an enriched family environment. This is refreshing in light of standardized assessments and Common Core State Standards related movements in education. One key principle for literacy instruction is to start *where the learner is* (National Academy of Science, 1999). Understanding the influences of children’s literacy skills beyond the school wall informs us of who they are and provides insight into how we assist children in learning.

It provides ample program practices with a moderate literature review which clearly illustrate perspectives about the family’s role in children’s literacy development. Readers will find the program approaches informative, which may help generate more ideas to suit their own practice. Though being literacy-focused, the ideas could be applied to different subject areas. Additionally, the approaches could be useful for all levels of education from preschool to adulthood. For educators and practitioners involved in family learning programs and seeking ideas to inspire family engagement project development, this book is a great resource for expanding the repertoire of family literacy practices.

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